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Fasting, Feasting Excerpt Mad 40

When in a foreign place, verbal communication with others is often a major concern. What many people rarely admit, however, is that a greater challenge is the nonverbal communication and adaptation to the mores and ways of the new place. Anita Desai brings up the silent tensions and obstacles that come with living in a new culture in her novel, Fasting, Feasting. Desai uses point of view, speech, and present tense to characterize Arun’s experience in America as one of silent isolation.

From the outset of the passage, Desai’s use of impersonal third person point of view demonstrates Arun’s isolation and detachment from his host family. Just as Arun and his host family have difficulty interacting and relating to each other, none of the characters relay the experiences personally to the reader. The impersonal narration disconnects the reader from the characters just as Arun’s relationship with his host family is one of detachment and isolation.

Working in tandem with the impersonal point of view, the speech – consisting of a lack of dialogue among the characters – strips Arun of any visible connection to his host family. Arun never actually speaks in the passage, which demonstrates both a disconnection from the reader and isolation from his temporary family. The only dialogue is in fact Mrs. Patton’s rejection of Arun’s desires and her singing to herself. Melanie does not speak at all. Desai makes the reader understand that most of Arun’s human interaction results in an ignorance of his wishes. Otherwise, he is surrounded by people who prefer to keep to themselves, further isolating him. The speech – consisting of simple quotations and no dialogue – reveal Arun’s isolated experiences with his host family.

In addition to her restricted use of speech, Desai’s use of present tense adds a sense of desperation that helps to further Arun’s isolation. When Desai says “the hair on the back of his neck begin[s] to prickle,” the reader senses the immediacy of Arun’s discomfort. The consistent introduction of discomforting situations would be enough to make the reader understand Arun’s isolation; however, the use of present tense gives his discomfort a sense of immediacy and transports the reader into the inescapable, isolating situation that mirrors the one that Arun experiences.

Throughout the excerpt, the reader senses the presence of a hopeless and inexpressible isolation. Anita Desai uses detached third person point of view, restricted speech, and present tense to portray Arun’s experience with his host family as one of inescapable, silent seclusion. Although the excerpt is a work of fiction, Desai has a unique ability to capture and replicate the discomfort that all people experience at some time, yet cannot express. Her mastery of human nature reminds readers that sometimes the most difficult communication is present in silence.